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CHAPTER 3

NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING + DESIGN

GOAL

Promote planning and design of the neighborhood in ways that preserve and enhance pedestrian-centered environment as linked to the Huckleberry Trail and the downtown, and promote neighborhood civic involvement.

BACKGROUND

As established in Chapter 1, Neighborhood History + Character, Miller-Southside is one of the oldest residential neighborhoods in Blacksburg, much of it built on the former Miller farmland. The initial subdivision by the Southside Land Company into long narrow lots oriented east-west served as the primary framework for the planning and design of the Miller-Southside neighborhood in the early 1900's. The dimensions of the grid of streets, alleys, and blocks are nearly the same throughout. North of Airport Road there are fewer streets and most do not connect to the original network.

In the 1960's the formal planning consisted of speculative planned developments for commercial uses along Main Street north of Faystone Drive as well as residential planned developments accessed from Airport Road. In 2003 another one was added and named Sylvan Court.

Only Draper extends south to Country Club Drive, the southern boundary.

Built over several decades its predominately single-family residences vary in detail but are consistent in building massing, setbacks, yards and landscape. Until the 1980's there was little formal planning, and design activity occurred on an individual basis as custom-built houses designed by local architects.

In 1983 Montgomery County adopted a Comprehensive Plan that acknowledged the importance of its built heritage and spawned interest to survey its historic structures throughout the County. In 1983 Montgomery County received a matching grant from the Division of Historic Landmarks and commissioned renowned historian and architect, Gibson Worsham who proceeded to record many facets of the County's history from its formation around 1740 and forward. His two-volume record includes significant and contributing structures as well as commerce and transportation growth, religious influences, and advances in education.

Findings from this county-wide survey lead several Blacksburg citizens to submit. Also at that time there were discussions about permitting additional apartments above garages or in basements of owner-occupied houses. Around its periphery the conversion of single-family homes into small businesses concern residents of eroding its residential character. Town-sponsored planning meetings for an update of the Town's Comprehensive Plan resulted in general policies to disallow additional apartments and limit conversion to special-use permits. Additional planning meetings discussed traffic concerns and safety on its walker-friendly, tree-lined streets.

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

MAIN STREET DEVELOPMENT AND PEDESTRIAN LIFE

Opportunities

Pedestrian links in neighborhood and between neighborhoods and downtown
Downtown commercial and institutional spaces with vital street life

Challenges

Gaps and barriers in pedestrian networks and road expansion
Vulnerable edges on portions of South Main Street and Country Club Drive anathema to street life

HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

Opportunities

Low crime rate and well-kept properties

Proximity to Virginia Tech makes it especially attractive to university faculty and staff

Neighbors often know each other

Challenges

Potential of unbalanced housing levels (through shift to student rentals *or* to exclusively high-income residences)
Proximity to Virginia Tech appeals to students, encouraging the purchase of properties by non-residents of the neighborhood for conversion to rentals
Students in adjacent neighborhoods can be noisy at night

STREET AND PUBLIC CHARACTER

Opportunities

Presence of undeveloped land within the neighborhood

Challenges

Shortage of parks within the neighborhood

CIVIC ACTIVITY AND ADVOCACY

Opportunities

High awareness and involvement of residents in Town of Blacksburg government affairs

Challenges

Maintenance of Town involvement and facilitation of involvement in Montgomery County government affairs

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GENERAL POLICIES

- Wide streets are hostile to pedestrians (Community Design, 8.)
- Preserve and enhance pedestrian opportunities in and around the neighborhood (Executive Summary, 38)
- Protect vulnerable edges from automobile-centered commercial encroachment (Neighborhood Planning, 23)
- Encourage infill development in established areas that is compatible with existing and/or planned land use (Town Sections Overview, 4)
- Maintain housing patterns that suit multiple income levels; maintain existing diversity of housing sizes; preserve and/or increase affordability (Economic Development, 39)
- Advocate for town to purchase parkland within the neighborhood, to possibly include the Rugby Field (Parks and Recreation, 20-21, Midtown South, 13, Community Design, 26 and Appendix D: Property Acquisition Priority List, 3)
- Advocate against policies or development likely to significantly reduce green spaces (Executive Summary, 12)

TOWN ACTION STRATEGIES

MAIN STREET DEVELOPMENT AND PEDESTRIAN LIFE

- Support plans to further develop pedestrian network including proposed Main Street landscaping and enhancements
- Explore alternatives to the proposed Southgate-US460 interchange
- Create pedestrian-friendly conditions on (1) South Main Street, south of Airport Road and (2) Country Club Drive
- Stitch together Miller Southside and the Mountain View neighborhood on the East side of Main Street (pedestrian access across South Main Street)
- Ensure that Main Street development is conducted under a single set of policies that extends to both the east and west sides of the street (maintaining high standards, even on the side of main street not governed by Miller-Southside)
- Support the preservation of existing Main Street homes and their conversion to small businesses
- Promote narrowing of Main Street to one lane each way with separate left-turn lanes, per the recommendation of the town traffic engineer. This involves creating a tree-lined center median.
- Maintain minimum or no access to 460 Bypass between 460 Business/South Main Street and Price's Fork Road
- Provide adequate sidewalks on important pedestrian thoroughways
- Promote mixed-use development on Main Street that includes housing above commercial space
- Provide for traffic-calming on automobile thoroughways such as Airport Road, Draper Road Southgate Road and Edgewood Road

HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

- Encourage rentals when the owner lives in a property contiguous to the rental property or within the same structure as the rental property as a strategy to maintain housing affordability; discourage rentals where the owner does not live adjacent to the renter.
- Protect the alleyways in the neighborhood from destruction
- Establish a civic park buffer between downtown and Miller-Southside to encompass the town library, police station and Municipal Building. Advocate for the elimination or reduction of Municipal Building on-site parking (Parking could be provided by the new parking structure across the street). Tie this park into the proposed community indoor market at the current site of Doc Roberts.

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STREET AND PUBLIC CHARACTER

- Advocate for parkland. To discourage auto-centered businesses from metastasizing, buttress the street edges of undeveloped land with residences or pedestrian-centered businesses
- Provide safe, functional and attractive entrances to the Huckleberry Trail and enhance existing greenways.
- Provide for new street lights in Miller-Southside to be small-scale

NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION STRATEGIES

MAIN STREET DEVELOPMENT AND PEDESTRIAN LIFE

- Discourage strip malls, office parks and other auto-centered businesses from encroaching on vulnerable neighborhood edges.
- Plan for obsolescence of the fast food and similar parking-lagoon business that currently occupy a stretch of South Main Street. What happens to these buildings when they are deserted?
- Establish a dialog with relevant businesses
- Advocate for appropriate use of the old Middle School on Eheart Street and South Main Street

HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

- Identify real estate agents that are sympathetic to the concerns of Miller-Southside and actively encourage residents to use their services.
- Oppose special permits on neighborhood roads other than Main Street. Maintain residential dominance in Miller-Southside
- Advocate for Miller-Southside in the town and county zoning processes.
- Maintain pro-active and vigilant stance toward future development within and around the neighborhood

STREET AND PUBLIC CHARACTER

- Establish a dialog with owners of undeveloped land in, and adjacent to, the neighborhood including existing homeowners, The Rugby Club, The German Club, the Virginia Tech Turfgrass Research Group and the Miller Street strip mall.

CIVIC ACTIVITY AND ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

- Develop a communication network to alert residents to applications for Special Use Permits.
- Open communication with civic and commercial neighbors to work together for maintenance of neighborhood character (Kroger, Children's Nest, VT Corporate Research Center, Police, Library, Miller Street shopping strip, Montgomery County and Blacksburg Long-Range Planning Commission.)
- Continue close contact with town staff to keep residents informed about relevant town programs and progress regarding neighborhood concerns.
- Form action committees through the Miller-Southside Alliance to work on relevant issues such as future development, historical preservation, greenways, etc.
- Establish a dialog with Mountain View and other adjacent neighborhoods
- Increase membership in Miller Southside Alliance
- Identify block captains responsible for neighborhood group communications
- Organize neighborhood-wide activities, such as yard sales, to create a sense of community and raise funds for the Miller-Southside Alliance

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- Expand the annual Draper-Preston party to the entire Miller-Southside neighborhood, perhaps rotating locations every year
- Consider including a town-neighborhood outreach event (i.e. an annual gathering)
- Advocate for neighborhood concerns within town and county government
- Promote Miller-Southside Alliance to residents